DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 152 080 FL 009 312

AUTHOR Hafernik, Johnnie Johnson; Surguine, Harold
TITLE Using Radio Commercials as Supplementary Materials for Teaching Listening.
PUB DATE Jan 78
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the annual meeting of the California Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (Pasadena, California, April 14-16, 1978) ; Not available in hard copy due to poor reproducibility or original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Education; *English (Second Language); Instructional Aids; *Language Instruction; Learning Activities; *Listening Comprehension; *Listening Skills; *Radio; Second Language Learning; Standard Spoken Usage; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Radio commercials, used as supplementary materials in the English as a second language class, have the following advantages: (1) they correspond closely to everyday spoken English; (2) they are clear; (3) they are short enough to sustain student interest; (4) the many redundancies in the message enable even the slower student to understand; (5) they are adaptible to many levels; (6) they provide general entertainment; and (7) main-stream American culture as well as its language are represented in commercials. These commercials can be used initially as comprehension exercises and, later, as the basis for discussion about American culture. Simple comprehension questions can be followed by a cloze-dictation exercise, and then by role-playing, values clarification exercises, discussion questions, and contact assignments. A sample classroom technique is appended. (Author/AM)

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USING RADIO COMMERCIALS AS SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS FOR TEACHING LISTENING

Johnnie Johnson Hafernik/1

Harold Surguine/2

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[1]World English Center, University of San Francisco, San Francisco, California 94117.

[2]The International Students of English Program, Dominican College, San Rafael, Ca. 94901.

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As ESL teachers, we are always trying to make our classes more relevant and more characteristic of the "real" English speaking world. Our goal is to prepare our students to cope with English outside the classroom. One area of difficulty for most ESL students is listening comprehension. Students often panic when they hear English on TV, the radio, or in situations in which they can do nothing to slow down the speaker(s) and are unable to have things repeated. In order to bring these situations into the listening class, we've adopted radio commercials. Other teachers have experimented with them.[1] After using radio commercials a couple of times, we realized that they had possibilities we hadn't ever imagined. We have found them applicable in levels from low-intermediate to advanced. (Here low-intermediate is used to describe students who have a very basic command of English, around a score of 375 on the TOFEL.) We advocate using these media advertisements as supplementary materials and <u>not</u> as the bulk of the class material.

A number of characteristics make radio commercials pedagogically sound tools for teaching listening: (1) close-correspondence to everyday spoken English (2) sound clarity (3) length (4) redundancy (5) adaptability to multi-level classes (6) general entertainment (7) representation of main-stream American culture.

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[1]Janet Hafner as mentioned in Judy E. Winn-Bell Olsen, <u>Communication Starters and other Activities for the ESL Classroom</u> (San Francisco: The Alemany Press, 1977), p. 20.

Radio commercials bring a "real " English experience into the classroom because they contain English native speakers hear and use. Many students avoid listening to the radio because they feel their English isn't adequate. When they do try, they're often frustrated. Students complain that the radio announcers and speakers in commercials talk faster than normal. This is not the case, however. The dialogue or monologue in a radio commercial is usually spoken at a normal pace. Using radio commercials in class can help students feel more at ease with this pace. They also provide students with current and often essential vocabulary in context. For example, Contac, or other cold medicine, commercials introduce or reinforce medical vocabulary such as "tablets, congested, symptons, and runny nose". These words can help our students when they have to descirbe how they feel to a doctor or friend. Since few people make it through a winter without a cold, students are directly interested in these words. Students realize that radio commercials are preparing them to cope with English outside the classroom. This is one reason they like them.

This "real" English, so frustrating to ESL students, can be made more comprehensible with radio commercials. Several features help to keep student frustration level low. One feature is the sound clarity of radio commercials. Sponsors spend a lot of money to make a technically high-quality commercial because they are trying to sell us their

products. Unlike some tapes we as teachers make in backrooms while competing with typewriters and pencil sharpeners for sonic space, radio commercials contain only wanted sounds. We would like to expose our students to a variety of listening experiences and situations. Therefore, it's advantageous to present our students with listening exercises with and without background noise. Some radio commercials provide special effects which help students visualize the setting of the dialogue. These are hard to come by for the language teacher. For example, on a Master Charge commercial a wife picks up her husband after work and then a conversation takes place as they drive home. Traffic noise is very loud at first; then a door slams and it dimishes. Students can use these clues to answer the question "Where do the husband and wife meet?"

The length of radio commercials is another feature which keeps the frustration level low. In order to keep the listeners' attention, radio commercials are short - generally only 60 seconds long. Most students can and will concentrate for such a short period even if the material is difficult. It's amazing how great the students' interest is even after the n-th playing.

One of the best features of radio commercials is their redundancy. We, as native speakers of English, often find their redundancy a nuisance, but the paraphrasing and repetition of certain phrases gives students more opportunities to understand. Thus, even low-intermediate students can gain a feeling of

success and not one of frustration. The adaptability of radio commercials cannot be over-emphasized.

Teachers play a large role in the degree of the students' success. Teachers must gear the exercises to their students, taking into account students' needs and weaknesses. Subtle humor, idiomatic usage, and examples of dialect which may be over the heads of lower students can be used as topics with a more advanced class. Perhaps with a low-intermediate class after hearing a radio commercial twice they can only answer the question, "What's being advertised?". Yet, this is an accomplishment and the students should be proud of this first step and be encouraged. If the students gain self-confidence by listening to radio commercials in class, then perhaps they'll feel braver and more assured about tackling English outside the classroom.

As mentioned earlier students enjoy radio commercials because they present "real" English. Another reason students like radio commercials is because they're entertaining. The music often found at the beginning and end of radio commercials is relaxing and some of the lyrics are so redundant and catchy that many of the students leave the class singing. The humor and sarcasm found in them are entertaining as well. Some humor is obvious and goes across cultural lines; other humor is more culture-bound. The latter provides a way to teach American culture. Students are usually interested in learning about American culture, and radio commercials are an ideal tool for this. They generally present the values and

morals of the main-stream American public and are full of stereotypes recognizable and amusing to most Americans. They provide examples of different registers and usages depending upon the audience they are aiming at. In addition, they touch on controversial topics. Through radio commercials students are exposed to diverse sketches of our multi-faceted society. It's best for teachers to present the radio commercial first without showing their own cultural biases or prejudices. Initially teachers should be concerned only with the students' comprehension of the material. After the straight forward comprehension exercises have been done, more subjective exercises can be handled. Related information along with views and opinions differing from those presented in the radio commercial can be presented and discussed. Teachers can also state their beliefs if they want to. However, students should be encouraged to think for themselves and reach their own conclusions.

The types of exercises one can do with radio commercials seem endless. Some of them are: (1) true/false (2) multiple choice (3) short answer (4) matching (5) cloze-dictation (6) adapted role play (7) values clarification (8) discussion (9) contact assignments. The first four types mentioned are used for simple comprehension questions. These should progress from general questions (usually about three) to more specific questions (usually from three to five). If it is a very low class then most of the questions should be general. If advanced, most should be specific and/or inference questions. As much

as possible students should be listening to and not reading these questions. The true/false statements can be read to students, once or twice depending on the level. With the multiple choice questions, students should listen to the question and circle the answer (a,b,c, or d) on their handouts. Short answer questions can dictated. Students should be urged to write only one or two word answers, not sentences.

One step beyond simple comprehension exercises is a cloze-dictation exercise. To make a cloze-dictation exercise one first needs the text of the commercial. Then listen to it and mark where the speakers pause. By doing this one can more easily ascertain which words should be blanked out. Care must be taken to space the blanks sufficiently far apart. A formula we've found successful is one blank for every ten seconds. Content and/or function words may be blanked out. All of the blanks could be the same part of speech, have the same vowel or consonant sound, be a reduced form, etc. Gear the cloze-dictation exercise to the students.

The latter four types of exercises are more cognitive and should <u>follow</u> the comprehension and/or cloze-dictation exercises. Many radio commercials lend themselves to adapted role play. For example, after doing a Contac commercial have students act out a visit to a doctor's office or a trip to a drugstore for cold medicine. Another technique is values clarification exercises which can serve as a way to get into discussion. The discussion questions should get the students to talk about

themselves, their countries, their experiences and beliefs. Both of the latter exercises should take into account class level - the higher the class the more sophisticated and probing the questions. Finally, contact assignments are especially good for getting students to use what they've learned outside of class. After the Contac commercial students could ask several Americans such questions as: (1) About how many colds do you get each winter? (2) Do you usually go to the doctor when you have a cold? (3) Do you usually miss school/ work when you're sick? Of course, not all of these exercises mentioned should be used with every commercial. Don't saturate the students with exercises.

Before a radio commercial is used you might spend a little time explaining the reasons for using them. Students generally respond favorably to this explanation: "Radio commercials will give you practice listening to everyday, current English spoken at a normal pace and will help you learn something about the U.S. and its people. Also, I think you will enjoy them." Students should understand that they are not being urged to buy any of the products advertised, and that teachers aren't getting a commission.

We have found it best to use radio commercials no more than once a week. A radio commercial with exercises will usually take about 40 minutes. As mentioned above teachers have numerous options in choosing exercises. Below is a sample classroom technique with modifications.

LOW-INTERMEDIATE	INTERMEDIATE - ADVANCED
1. Play the commercial. Watch facial expressions, etc. for clues to students' comprehension.	1. Play the commercial. Watch facial expressions, etc. for clues to students' comprehension.
2. Dictate general comprehension short-answer questions (about three). Handle any new vocabulary found in the dictated questions. Make sure the questions are understood by all students.	2. Ask for oral responses to gener short answer questions. Handle any new vocabulary found in the questions or their answers.
3. Play the tape again, perhaps two or three times, so the students can write the answers as they listen. They should write short answers, not sentences.	3. Handout the ditto with the more specific questions or dictate them.
4. Check the answers together.	4. Play the tape as many times as needed while students write the answers. They should write short answers, not sentences.
5. Either handout ditto or dictate the more specific questions (three - five). (The questions can be made more general for lower classes.)	5. Check the answers. Handle any vocabulary questions or problem
	6. Hand out the text/cloze-dictation exercise.
	7. Play the tape again several times, so the students can complete the cloze-dictation exercise while listening.

6. Play the tape again.
7. Allow time for students to write the answers to the questions. Students may need to hear the tape several times.
8. Check the answers. Answer any questions.
9. Handout the text/cloze-dictation exercise.
10. Play the tape again several times, so the students can complete the cloze-dictation exercise while listening.
11. Collect the cloze-dictation exercise and answer any questions.
12. Do values clarification/ discussion questions.
13. Do adapted role play if applicable.

8. Collect cloze-dictation exercise
9. Do values clarification/ discussion questions as a class or subdivided into groups.
10. Do adapted role play and/or explain the dittoed contact assignment.

In order to obtain radio commercials to use in your listening class, simply get a tape recorder, radio, tape and jack. Connect the tape recorder and the radio. Then tape the

commercial you want. The sound quality is best at 7½ i.p.s. Often a commercial is played at the same time everyday. So, pick your favorite commercials and tape them.

We've found the use of radio commercials to be an exciting pedagogical tool for the listening class. The language is common and the content applicable to varying student needs. New possibilities are continually presenting themselves to us. We think you'll have the same experience.

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